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# Activist-Students: Radical Adult Education from Community to Campus – and Back Again

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# Activist-Students: Radical Adult Education from Community to Campus – and Back Again

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**Abstract:** A panel of activist-students, each in a different phase of their academic study of adult education, use their own experiences to examine critical questions about the relationship between theory and practice in radical adult education.

## Introduction

Donna Chovanec

In this symposium, a panel of activist-students at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada describe their practice, the questions about their world and their work that have drawn them to the academy, and the theorizing that has impacted their practice. They are each in different phases of their academic study of adult education but all are committed social activists. Each student starts from her or his own experience as an activist in labour unions, campus activism, anti-racist education or global social movements to examine critical questions about the theory and the practice of radical adult education. Each exemplifies Freire's notion of the critical intellectual who is "striving to know through a constant process of interaction with others and an ever-changing world. The quest to know is simultaneously a commitment to a certain mode of acting and *being*" (Roberts, 2005, p. 452).

In the intersection of their activist and their academic work, they live "the importance of education in the process of *denunciation* of a perverse reality, as well as in that of *announcing* a different reality to be born from the transformed denounced reality" (Freire, 2004, p. 72). Together, they share a similar critique of systems of oppression that are grounded in global capitalism. They are influenced by critical educators such as Freire (2005/1973), hooks (2003), Giroux (2005), McLaren (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), and Apple (1999) but they approach their specific queries through a diverse set of theories and theorists.

The first, a youth labour activist, is in her first year of graduate school. Questions that arose in her practice have drawn her back to the university in hopes that pedagogical theory will offer answers that will revitalize her practice. The second contrasts the energetic moralism of his undergraduate activism with the more mature, theory-informed campus activism of his graduate experience. Through their graduate studies, two activist-students have tried to understand resistance to anti-racist education. In the third paper, they demonstrate an ongoing process of reflecting upon, testing, and integrating theory into their everyday practice as they simultaneously engage in academic work and community action. A doctoral student completes the papers with a look at the intersection of class interests and the global human rights agenda, a connection that he first hypothesized in Christian development work many years ago.

Through this symposium, we provide examples of activist-student praxis – the dialectical unity of thought and action, of theory and practice. We share our practice and we reveal our questions, our theorizing, and the effects on our practice. We "engage in the critical and permanent exercise of thinking through one's own practice in order to theorize it..." (Freire, 2004, p. 26). Thus, even this symposium is a continuation of the iterative cycle of action and

reflection. We invite others to participate by sharing their struggle to enrich their practice and the field of theory while remaining true to their activist communities and selves.

Through the examples of these students, we claim the academy as a space for the development of critical intellectuals. Like Freire, we urge “critical intellectuals to become involved in the struggle to build a better social world” (Roberts, 2005, p. 453). We insist that the academy has a responsibility and the capability to contribute to a just and equitable world for all. In the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta, we work together to defend, preserve and expand academic spaces for critical theorizing and social action in accordance with this vision amidst the barrage of instrumentalizing, marketizing and technicizing forces that encroach upon the academy.

We challenge others to find or create such spaces in their academic institutions, bringing radical adult education from the community to the campus – and back again... because, ultimately, “education is *before*, is *during* and is *after*... It’s impossible to organize without educating and *being* educated by the very process of organizing” (Freire in Holst, 2002, p. 80).

### **Questioning My Practice: The Search for Theory**

Natasha Goudar

As a youth union organizer/activist/educator, I have been well trained in the popular education methods that are used extensively in the labour movement. For labour educators who believe in the liberation and transformation of workers’ lives, popular education has become an integral part of the philosophy of education for social change. “Popular education, as both a liberating theory and a critical, reflective practice, is especially well suited for adult learners and is increasingly being experimented by labor educators” (Bernard, 2002, p. 7). Within the labour movement, “popular educators embrace a vision of education that links theory and practice, a philosophy that supports social change and that challenges existing power relationships, and a methodology that is learner-centered and values the knowledge and experience of the workers and participants” (Wong, 2002, p. 1). Stopping to reflect on my experience with one project in particular brings me back to the university – accompanied by many questions.

The Solidarity WORKS! Youth Labour Education Action Project, was a project that was aimed at young people (under 26 years of age) who were on the cusp of activism in their unions and their communities. The Solidarity WORKS! curriculum used popular education methodology designed by Canadian popular educators, called the spiral model (Arnold et al., 1991), to develop youth activist skills in leadership, public speaking, group building and outreach for social change. The spiral model encompasses popular education theory in a number of ways. First, it values the knowledge and experience of participants over outside expert knowledge, which is traditionally understood to be objective truth. Secondly, the model allows for everyone to teach and everyone to learn through critical dialogue, which engages all participants, including facilitators, in the process of creating new critical knowledge. Thirdly, it leads participants to social action and transformation through the application of the new critical knowledge that has been generated. Finally, the spiral model “helps introduce a dynamic relationship, between action and reflection, into the design of an educational event” (Arnold et al., 1991, p. 39).

Despite some successful experiences throughout my five years of coordinating the project and using the spiral model popular education philosophy and methodology, I also recognized one common issue – the majority of graduates would leave the program excited about what they learned but then found themselves with little or no access to the tools, communities, and organizations they needed to actually use the skills and knowledge to make change in their “real”

lives. This realization led me to question the effectiveness of the popular education process for creating and sustaining social change, the transferability of the skills learned in the program to actual situations, and the conditions that are needed – both inside and outside the classroom - to ensure success in building empowered, aware, and active citizens.

Although I am experienced in the practical application of popular education, I have had little opportunity to spend time examining transformative theories of education that focus on social change. In my first year of graduate school, I am learning to apply theory to my practical experiences in labour education. I am hopeful that my continued examination of educational theories for social change will help me return to activist practice with a renewed sense of purpose.

### **How Theory Informs My Practice the Second Time Around**

Colin Piquette

Being raised by politically active parents, I was exposed to activism very early and became a community youth activist. Later, I was president of the campus New Democrats in my first year as an undergraduate student. I was also involved in various other causes, leading up to a campus initiative in coalition building called the United Action Slate, which failed for several reasons. After a five-year stint teaching English in Korea, I am back in Canada doing activist work, both on and off campus, and I am in my second year of graduate work in adult education.

My current studies have illuminated and changed my work as an activist. Previously, I worked without the benefit of theory and without realizing the importance of critical reflection or praxis. Organizational tactics were as inviolate as ideology. I recognize that lacking a clearly articulated theory or even a clear purpose to our work had negative effects on the outcomes of the actions themselves, but especially on our own sustainability as social activists. Although a number of my fellow activists are now working in the labour and environmental movements, most of the promising activists I once knew have long since been lost to the cause. I believe that many of us became disappointed and cynical when we realized that our moral absolutism was not enough to keep us going.

In contrast, I bring a more theoretical perspective to my present activism on campus. Specifically, I recognize the benefits of a more mindful approach to activism, for example, the “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959), the importance of the critical reflection/action cycle (Alinsky, 1989/1971; Freire, 2005/1973; Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990), and of true dialogue as described by Freire. I have also learned about the importance of staying within people’s own lived experience by paying attention to power relationships, class differences, and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977).

Since returning to campus-based activism after a fifteen year hiatus, I have been instrumental in re-establishing the *Friends of the Lubicon* in Alberta (a solidarity group with the Lubicon First Nation) with an organizing core of student activists, in establishing a campus public healthcare advocacy group (Campus Community for Public Healthcare, CCPH) and, through CCPH, in forming an Edmonton regional chapter of *Friends of Medicare*. In this work, I have discovered that campus activists have the potential to be highly effective activists in the wider community under the proper conditions and with the appropriate knowledge. Unpacking these proper conditions, appropriate knowledge, and what counts as “effective” activism are some of the questions I am addressing in my present masters thesis research, a participatory action research project with the *Friends of the Lubicon*, on facilitating activist learning.

I increasingly appreciate the direct relevance that my own field, adult education, has to student activism, and how student activism can be effectively viewed as a form of radical adult

education. The biggest difference, in regards to my own work, is my new mindfulness of the student activist as learner (including myself) and the connection between student activist learning experiences and their perceptions of political efficacy and the scope of potential activities, which, in turn, impact their longer term engagement in social activism.

### **Working the Theory/Practice Dialectic**

Evelyn Hamdon and Zenobia Jamal

In our individual and collective experiences as anti-oppression and anti-racist educators, we have become increasingly aware of learners' resistance to interrogating their own racism and their positionalities. Our experience of this resistance led us to explore its causes, both from theory and through our practice. The theory we encountered during our graduate studies in adult education on difference, identity, racism and anti-racism helped us to explore and understand this resistance from a theoretical perspective. Through our practice, we discovered the need to let our experiences in the classroom 'talk back' to these theories. We strived to stay away from "a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379) but to see the movement between theory and practice as an ongoing dialogue and process of discovery.

Theory appeared to us as neither utopian nor impractical. Theory and practice are enhanced when they are in service to one another (Beach, 2005). The literature offers insights about the challenges of anti-racist education including learner resistance. Resistance can manifest as a desire for stable and secure identities (Schick, 2000), rejection of knowledge that is potentially dangerous to the coherence of the self (Carson & Johnson, 2000), resistance to the subordination of privileged narratives (Aveling, 2006), and negating the narratives of the marginalized and oppressed (Srivastava & Francis, 2006). Theorists also provided us with a range of pedagogical strategies to respond to resistance. Carson and Johnson advocate for a pedagogy of compassion to move learners away from the binaries of blame and guilt. Srivastava and Francis recommend an inquiry into power relations that permeate our views on identity and difference and pedagogical strategies for working towards these goals. Aveling and St. Denis and Schick (2003) expose their students to the histories of oppressed and marginalized groups, a social and political analysis of the various factors that have contributed to racism, including an examination of the power dynamics, and encourage learners to reflect on and examine their own subject positions.

Drawing upon these insights from the literature, we have developed a model and strategies for anti-oppression and anti-racist education that specifically address resistance. The cognitive and affective experiences and feedback from the participants in our workshops, as well as our own reflection and analyses of their responses, provide us with a way to talk back to the theory. Theory mediates our experiences in the classroom and the response of learners mediates our readings of theory. Anti-racist work requires theory and practice to be in service to one another (Gillborn, 2006). A clear conceptual map and strong theoretical frameworks can provide a starting point for anti-racist education and action, and ensure that this area of study and endeavor retain "a radical, critical edge" (p. 18). Without this reconciliation between the two, anti-racist education will remain bound by empty rhetoric and lose its capacity for radical transformation (Gillborn, 2006; Hendricks, 2003).

As community educators and activists, we continue the dialogue between theory and practice. Theory helps us illuminate the issues we are passionate about, and provides strategies for action. Our world of practice, through our anti-oppression and anti-racist workshops, provides us with a counter balance to the world of theory. This dialogue and the ongoing process of moving between theory and practice serves the additional purpose of keeping us on our

theoretical toes and avoiding the pitfalls of becoming reified in our own ideological stance. Ultimately, the ongoing process of action and reflection contributes to radical social transformation.

### **Theory and Practice Coming Full Circle**

Lee Ellis

My early exposure to the Social Gospel, which animated much of the 19th and 20th century agrarian social movements in Western Canada, was instrumental in developing in me the framework for a social justice orientation. Also influential was a global education initiative of the mainline Canadian Christian Churches (TEN DAYS for Global Justice) established in 1973, following the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (2005/1973). TEN DAYS is a focused education and action program designed to encourage grassroots support for global social change by helping people discover, examine, reflect and act on the ways global and domestic policies perpetuate injustice for the majority of the world's people.

Through my participation in these initiatives, I encountered first-hand the limitations of well-intentioned efforts at reform that did not include a class analysis. Early Social Gospellers recognized Canada as a class-based society that could not be understood without class analysis and Freire was clear about the centrality of class struggle and class analysis in moving toward social justice. Yet, the church folk involved in the TEN DAYS program, while critical of the various manifestations of capitalist social organization, did not explicitly recognize the fundamentally antagonistic class interests at work globally and ignored or minimized the oppressed/oppressor relationship between the minority capitalist owning class (along with managers and professionals) and the majority working class.

Sensing this fundamental contradiction in Canadian Christian social justice work prompted me to periodically re-enter the academy, most recently as a doctoral candidate, in search of a theoretical understanding for some of the observations and conclusions I had made working in the field. My academic studies sharpened my appreciation of the need for a more critical social analysis that takes into account differences in material class position and class interests. I identified class interests served by the neo-liberal agenda of global capitalism as one of the principal obstacles to the realization of substantive global justice for the majority of the world's population. Michael Albert (1995) writes that "when people became politically committed they generally gravitated to class analysis and marxism, assuming they became ideological at all." In my case, I had come full circle.

In this regard, I began to recognize the importance of the human rights agenda in developing and nurturing a penetrating critique of the private property rights agenda underpinning the capitalist system. The language of human rights is more easily understood and accepted by people today than is the language of political economy and historical materialism, and as such has great potential as an educational tool for justice. Although the international human rights compact is largely a liberal innovation, designed by and for Western liberal elites, it retains the important inherent feature of much of the liberal rhetoric that was never meant to be implemented. A small minority of the world's population (including transnational corporate "citizens") already enjoys the benefits of the human rights embodied in the Universal Declaration, in many cases, without the attendant responsibilities and obligations. This small group of global "vampire elite" understands very well the implications of a generalized implementation of the human rights agenda and the resulting reductions in inequality. Actively impeding the inclusion of human rights education in formal and other national educational curricula is one way of preserving their class privilege.

I contend that, if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and associated covenants and declarations) were to be implemented and enforced on a global scale, it would necessarily curtail the most egregious excesses of global capitalism. Thus, just as I recognized in my early activism, I maintain that class interests prevent the implementation of a systematic approach to human rights, through human rights education, that would help us move toward true universalization of human rights (Aronowitz, 2003; Baxi, & Koenig, 2006; hooks, 2003; Lovett, 1988; McLaren, & Farahmandpur, 2005; Mojab, 2005; Schugurensky, 2006).

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